



## ***Military Pension Files (1776-1916): A Gold Mine for Family History Research***

Julia A. Anderson, MA, AG®  
FHL Research Specialist

### **Objectives**

- Understand when and why military pension records were created
- Learn what valuable genealogical information pension files may contain
- Locate pension files for your ancestors

### **Overview of pension records**

- What is a pension?
  - Monetary benefit for veterans, their widows, or minor heirs
  - Paid monthly or annually
  - Invalid (Disability), Service, or Widow's
  - Benefits were based on Congressional Acts and changed periodically
- Pension records covered in this lecture are for the following wars:
  - Revolutionary War (1775-1781)
  - War of 1812 (1812-1815)
  - Indian Wars (1817-1898)
  - Mexican War (1846-1848)
  - Civil War (1861-1865)
  - Spanish-American War (1898-1898)
  - Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902)

### **Revolutionary War pensions**

- Promise of benefits and pensions enticed soldiers to enlist
- Granted by both individual states and the federal government
- Key Pension Legislation
  - Pension Act of 26 August 1776
    - For injured soldiers and sailors who could not earn a living
  - Congressional Resolution of 15 May 1778
    - Half-pay for all officers and \$80 bonus for enlisted men who finished the war
  - War Act of 1818
    - For War veterans who were not disabled, but had financial need
  - Pension Act of 1832
    - Full pay for life for officers and enlisted men who served more than 2 years
    - Partial pay for those who served between 6 months and 2 years
  - Every new pension law created new records
  - Before 1800, military records, including pensions, were kept by the war department

- Record loss
  - A fire on 8 November 1800 at the war department destroyed all previous Revolutionary War pension and bounty land warrant applications
  - Fortunately, most of the Revolutionary War pensions were granted after 1800.
- Documents found in Revolutionary War pension files:
  - Military records
    - Commissions
    - Certificates
    - Discharges
    - Muster rolls
  - Land records
    - Deeds
    - Grants
  - Probate records
    - Wills
    - Guardianship papers
  - Vital records
    - Marriage certificates
    - Pages from family Bibles
  - Manuscripts
    - Diaries
    - Journals
    - Letters
  - Newspaper clippings
- Survivor's pension files
  - Filed in 10x14-inch envelopes at National Archives
  - 1-200 pages of information (average is 30 pages)
    - Pension Application(s)
    - Evidence of identity and service
      - Affidavits
      - Marriage records
      - Letters and certificates
    - Forms showing government action on pension
- Widow's pension files
  - Similar to survivor's pension files, but with more family information
    - Age
    - Residence
    - Maiden name
    - Date and place of marriage
    - Date and place of husband's death
- Resources
  - National Archives Prologue Magazine – “Using Revolutionary War Pension Files to Find Family Information”  
<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2015/summer/rev-war-pensions.html>
  - FamilySearch Wiki – “Revolutionary War Pension Records and Bounty Land Warrants”  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Revolutionary\\_War\\_Pension\\_Records\\_and\\_Bounty\\_Land\\_Warrants](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Revolutionary_War_Pension_Records_and_Bounty_Land_Warrants)

## War of 1812 pensions

- 180,000 files
- Pensions granted before 1871
  - Veteran or widow must not be capable of earning a living
- Pension Act of 14 February 1871
  - Served at least 60 days
  - Honorably discharged
  - Included widows if they were married to soldier before 17 February 1815 (peace treaty that ended the war)
- Pension Act of 1878
  - Served at least 14 days
  - Included veterans, widows, children
- Documents found in War of 1812 pension files:
  - Family Records
    - Pages from family Bibles
    - Marriage certificates
    - Photographs
    - Letters
  - Military records
    - Discharge papers
  - Church records
  - Land deeds
  - Affidavits from family, friends, neighbors, and other associates
- Genealogical evidence found in War of 1812 pension documents:
  - Name
  - Age
  - Residence
  - Date and place of birth
  - Military service
  - Family information
  - Personal history
  - Wife's maiden name
  - Date and place of marriage
  - Name of former wife, if any, and marriage information
- Names and birthdates of living children
- Resources
  - FamilySearch Blog – “How to Use War of 1812 Pension Files”  
<https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/war-1812-pension-files/>
  - RootsTech Handout – “War of 1812 Pension Files”  
[https://static.coreapps.net/rootstech2018/handouts/a99747d94a5313b56b0efb8b4546b63d\\_1.pdf](https://static.coreapps.net/rootstech2018/handouts/a99747d94a5313b56b0efb8b4546b63d_1.pdf)
  - National Archives Catalog – War of 1812 Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files, ca.1871-ca.1900  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/564415>
  - National Archives – Military Records: War of 1812  
<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/war-of-1812>
  - FamilySearch Wiki – “United States in the War of 1812”  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_in\\_the\\_War\\_of\\_1812](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_in_the_War_of_1812)

## Indian Wars pensions

- Included many “Indian campaigns” between 1817-1898
- Submitted by veterans or widows who had not remarried
- 35,000 applications
- Documents found in Indian Wars pension files:
  - Pension documents
    - Application
    - Original jacket/envelope
    - Case brief
  - Military records
    - Statement of service
    - Affidavits
    - Depositions
    - Certificate of discharge
  - Medical records
  - Manuscripts
    - Letters
  - Vital records
    - Marriage records
    - Death certificate
    - Burial papers
    - Other documents
- Genealogical evidence found in Indian Wars pension documents:
  - Name
  - Age
  - Residence
  - Date and place of birth
  - Military service
  - Family information
  - Personal history
  - Wife’s maiden name
  - Date and place of marriage
  - Name of former wife, if any, and marriage information
  - Names and birthdates of living children
- Resources
  - National Archives Catalog – Records Supporting Claims for Service During the Indian Wars, 1892-1931  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/560995>
  - FamilySearch Wiki – “United States Indian Wars, 1780s-1890s”  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_Indian\\_Wars,\\_1780s-1890s](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Indian_Wars,_1780s-1890s)

## Mexican War pensions

- War between United States and Mexico, 1846-1848
- Pension applications could be submitted by veterans or widows (not remarried)
- 36,000 applications
- Documents found in Mexican War pension files
  - Pension documents
    - Application
    - Original jacket/envelope
    - Case brief
  - Military records
    - Statement of service
    - Affidavits
    - Depositions
    - Certificate of discharge
  - Medical records
  - Manuscripts
    - Letters
  - Vital records
    - Marriage records
    - Death certificate
    - Burial papers
    - Other documents
- Genealogical evidence found in Mexican War pension documents:
  - Name
  - Age
  - Residence
  - Date and place of birth
  - Military service
  - Family information
  - Wife's maiden name
  - Date and place of marriage
  - Name of former wife, if any, and marriage information
  - Names and birthdates of living children
- Resources
  - National Archives Catalog – Case Files of Mexican War Pension Applications, ca.1887-ca.1926  
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/1104361>
  - FamilySearch Wiki – “United States, Mexican War Pension Index – FamilySearch Historical Records”  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States,\\_Mexican\\_War\\_Pension\\_Index\\_-\\_FamilySearch\\_Historical\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States,_Mexican_War_Pension_Index_-_FamilySearch_Historical_Records)

## Civil War pensions

- War between United States of America and Confederate States of America (USA and CSA), 1861-1865
- Submitted by veterans or widows (not remarried)
- Over two million applications
- Documents found in Civil War pension files:
  - Pension documents
    - Application
    - Original jacket/envelope
    - Case brief
  - Military records
    - Statement of service
    - Affidavits
    - Depositions
    - Certificate of discharge
  - Medical records
  - Manuscripts
    - Letters
  - Vital records
    - Marriage records
    - Death certificate
    - Burial papers
    - Other documents
- Genealogical evidence found in Civil War pension documents:
  - Name and age
  - Residence
  - Date and place of birth
  - Military service
  - Family information
  - Wife's maiden name
  - Date and place of marriage
  - Name of former wife, if any, and marriage information
  - Names and birthdates of living children
- Resources
  - FamilySearch Wiki – “United States, Civil War Widows and Other Dependents Pension Files – FamilySearch Historical Records”  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States,\\_Civil\\_War\\_Widows\\_and\\_Other\\_Dependents\\_Pension\\_Files\\_-\\_FamilySearch\\_Historical\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States,_Civil_War_Widows_and_Other_Dependents_Pension_Files_-_FamilySearch_Historical_Records)
  - FamilySearch Wiki – “United States Civil War Pension Records (National Institute)”  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_Civil\\_War\\_Pension\\_Records\\_\(National\\_Institute\)](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Civil_War_Pension_Records_(National_Institute))
  - National Archives – Military Records: Civil War Records: Basic Research Sources  
<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war/resources#pension>
  - National Archives – “Pensions for Soldiers Who Served During the Civil War, 1861-65”  
<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/military/civil-war/pensions.pdf>
  - National Archives Prologue Magazine – “‘A Reasonable Degree of Promptitude’: Civil War Pension Application Processing, 1861-1885”  
<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2010/spring/civilwarpension.html>

## **Key Civil War (Union) pension laws**

- General Law – 22 July 1861
- Act to Grant Pensions of 14 July 1862 – for those with war-related disabilities  
Called “the most liberal pension law ever enacted by this government”
- Pension Act of 25 January 1879 (“Arrears Law”)
  - Veterans could get back pay if they qualified for a pension – clear back until the date of their discharge.
  - Many new pensioners applied at this time.
- Disability Act of June 27, 1890
  - Disability did not have to be war-related, but had to be permanent
  - Widows of soldiers who served at least 90 days entitled to \$8/month

## **Civil War (Confederacy) pension laws**

- Each state with Confederate soldiers eventually offered pensions to veterans and their widows, but they did not all do it the same way at the same time with the same benefits.
- Alabama
  - 1867 – Began granting pensions to Confederate veterans who had lost arms or legs.
  - 1886 – Began granting pensions to Veterans' widows.
  - 1891 – Law amended to include impoverished veterans or their widows.
- North Carolina
  - 1867 – Began granting pensions to Confederate veterans who were blinded or lost an arm or leg during their service.
  - 1885 – Began granting pensions to all other disabled indigent Confederate veterans or widows.
- Georgia
  - 1870 – Began granting pensions to soldiers with artificial limbs.
  - 1879 – Began granting pensions to other disabled Confederate veterans or their widows who then resided in Georgia.
  - 1894 – Eligible disabilities expanded to include old age and poverty.
- Florida
  - 1885 – Began granting pensions to Confederate veterans.
  - 1889 – Began granting pensions to veterans' widows.
- South Carolina
  - 1887 – Began granting pensions to indigent Confederate veterans or their widows.
  - 1919-1925 – Began granting pensions to Confederate veterans and widows regardless of financial need.
- Mississippi
  - 1888 – Began granting pensions to indigent Confederate veterans or their widows.
- Virginia
  - 1888 – Began granting pensions to Confederate veterans or their widows.
- Texas
  - 1881 – Set aside 1,280 acres for disabled Confederate veterans.
  - 1889 – Began granting pensions to indigent Confederate veterans and their widows.

- Tennessee
  - 1891– Began granting pensions to indigent Confederate veterans.
  - 1905 – Began granting pensions to veterans’ widows.
- Arkansas
  - 1891 – Began granting pensions to destitute Confederate veterans.
  - 1915 – Began granting pensions to veterans’ widows and mothers.
- Louisiana
  - 1898– Began granting pensions to indigent Confederate veterans or their widows.
- Missouri
  - 1911 – Began granting pensions to indigent Confederate veterans only; none were granted to widows.
  - Missouri also had a home for disabled Confederate veterans.
- Kentucky
  - 1912 – Began granting pensions to Confederate veterans or their widows.
- Oklahoma
  - 1915 – Began granting pensions to Confederate veterans or their widows.
- Resources
  - National Archives – Military Records: Confederate Pension Records  
<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war/confederate-pension-records>
  - FamilySearch Wiki – “Confederate Pension Records”  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Confederate\\_Pension\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Confederate_Pension_Records)

## Spanish-American War pensions

- 280,564 Sailors, marines, and soldiers served (2,061 died)
- Records more robust and accurate than Civil War records
- Documents found in Spanish-American War pension files
  - Application forms
  - Proof of marriage
  - Proof of children’s births
  - Summary of military service
  - Death certificates
- Resources
  - National Archives Prologue Magazine - “Sailors, Soldiers, and Marines of the Spanish-American War: The Legacy of the USS *Maine*”  
<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/spring/spanish-american-war-1.html>
  - FamilySearch Wiki – “Spanish-American War, 1898”  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Spanish-American\\_War,\\_1898](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Spanish-American_War,_1898)



## Philippine Insurrection pensions

- 4 February 1899 – 4 July 1902
- Also called the
  - Philippine-American War
  - Filipino-American War
  - Fil-American War
  - Philippine War
- 125,000 served; 4,200 died; 2,900 wounded
- Documents found in Philippine Insurrection pension files
  - Application forms
  - Proof of marriage
  - Proof of children's births
  - Summary of military service
  - Death certificates
- Resources
  - National Archives Prologue Magazine – “Researching Service in the U.S. Army During the Philippine Insurrection”  
<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2000/summer/philippine-insurrection.html>
  - FamilySearch Wiki – “Philippine Insurrection, 1899-1902”  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Philippine\\_Insurrection,\\_1899\\_to\\_1902](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Philippine_Insurrection,_1899_to_1902)

## Did my ancestor apply for a pension?

- Look for clues about military service
  - Death certificates
  - Census records
    - 1890 Census of Union Veterans and Widows of the Civil War  
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1877095>
    - 1910 – Union or Confederate Veteran
    - 1930 – Veteran and name of war
  - Headstones
    - Look for military symbols or reference to war or unit
  - Newspapers
    - Obituaries
    - Notable events like birthdays or anniversaries
    - Reunions
    - Special awards
  - Family stories and photographs
  - County histories
  - Letters

- Search the indexes
  - Not every person who served in the military applied for a pension
  - Indexes are available online at FamilySearch, Ancestry, Fold3, State libraries and archives
  - Books in Family History Library's reference section
  - FamilySearch Wiki – United States Military Online Genealogy Records  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_Military\\_Online\\_Genealogy\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Military_Online_Genealogy_Records)
  - FamilySearch Catalog – United States Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Applications, 1800–1900  
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1417475>
  - FamilySearch Catalog – United States General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934  
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1919699>

## How do I find the pension file?

- Search by conflict
  - Revolutionary War – Digitized on Fold3.com (\$)
  - War of 1812 – Partially digitized on Fold3.com (free), remainder at National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)
  - Indian Wars – NARA only
  - Mexican War – NARA only, except Mormon Battalion pension files digitized on Fold3.com (\$)
  - Civil War – Confederate files at state level with some on Ancestry.com (\$), Union files at NARA, some widow's pensions digitized on Fold3.com (\$)
  - Spanish-American War – NARA only\*
  - Philippine Insurrection – NARA only\*
- FamilySearch.org  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_Military\\_Online\\_Genealogy\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Military_Online_Genealogy_Records)
- Fold3.com (\$)  
<https://www.fold3.com>
- Ancestry.com (\$)  
<https://www.ancestry.com>
- National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)  
<https://www.archives.gov/>
  - National Archives Forms  
<https://www.archives.gov/forms>
  - National Archives Trust Fund Form 85  
<https://www.archives.gov/files/forms/pdf/natf-85.pdf>

## Using the Records

- Read the records
  - Read through the entire file
  - Transcribe each document
  - Consult charts and compare handwriting to figure out difficult words
  - Make note of everyone mentioned in the file and their relationships to the soldier, including friends, associates, neighbors, witnesses, etc.
- Study the records
  - Put documents in order
  - Create a timeline of events
  - Compare information on each document
  - Identify everyone mentioned in the file
- Analyze the records
  - Ask questions
    - Who created the document?
    - What does it say?
    - Who is it about?
    - What is it about?
    - Is there conflicting data?
- Evaluate the records
  - Ask more questions
    - What does the information in the record mean?
    - How reliable is the information?
    - What kind of evidence does it provide?
    - What can I conclude from the record?
  - Draw conclusions
    - Why did the veteran or his widow apply for a pension?
    - Why was the pension approved or rejected?
    - What relationships does the pension file prove?
    - What new avenues of research are open now?
- Resolve conflicts